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SUBJECT: UN EXPERTS SAY "NO WAY" VOTER REGISTRATION WILL
MEET DEADLINE

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Classified By: Political Counselor Russell Hanks for reason 1.4 (b) and
(d)

(S) Summary: The UN's top Nigeria-based technical experts on elections say that voter registration will not meet the December 14 deadline, and more significantly, technical problems are so pervasive that election delays are increasingly likely. The high stakes contest over the elections has exacerbated competition within INEC, UN officials say, and raise political questions about whether the organizers are intent on or capable of delivering credible elections in April 2007. End summary.

UN EXPERTS CONCERNED ABOUT VOTER REGISTRATION

¶1. (S) In a series of separate off the record, out of office, conversations, the UN's top technical elections officials said they are increasingly worried about the upcoming elections in Nigeria. The UN experts told Poloff that as technical advisers, they are unable to speak publicly about the ongoing process, but feel there are few positive signs of progress. The current voter registration process is, so far, a failure that is increasingly difficult to remedy in time to meet INEC's election timetable. The well-publicized problems including a lack of training for staff, an extreme shortage of machines, poor quality batteries for machines, and a lack of coordination, planning and publicity (reftel). All these factors contribute to a sense of desperation within INEC, as they try to play catch-up, and a sense of exasperation among external election experts.

¶2. (S) The lead UN technical expert told Poloff that efforts now would, at best, improve the next election in 2011. There is too little time for improvements in 2007 and a "need to hold the hands" of INEC officials, whom he described as "not technically capable." With no easy fixes in sight, a superficial registration exercise with little credibility or delayed registration deadlines and elections are the most likely scenarios, the UN expert said.

¶3. (S) Despite the confident external face of the INEC chairman, cracks in the facade are increasingly apparent. There are questions about whether the 20,000 voter registration machines from a Canadian supplier (the largest supplier) will arrive at all. Poor contract language on penalties for delays, and disputes about payment have all affected the procurement and machine deployment process. And even if the 33,000 machines were currently on the ground, "there is no way that INEC could meet the mid-December deadline," according to the technical advisers.

A DIFFICULT PARTNERSHIP

¶4. (S) Relations between the UNDP donor basket and INEC have been troubled. Last year, INEC threatened to cut relations with the donor basket, because they did not like the tone or content of the advice offered, including recommendations against electronic voting and registration. INEC, UNDP officials said, reminded them that level of international funding is relatively minor compared to Nigerian government financing. Subsequently, UNDP has taken a more accommodating position in public and in private and currently operates under a "be positive" strategy which avoids discussion of difficulties.

¶5. (S) Until recently, INEC sat in on all UNDP/donor basket meetings, leading to self-censorship. Even after it was decided to limit INEC's participation, the prevailing climate limits critical analysis at its meetings. On one recent occasion, when donor basket participants attempted to have a frank exchange with INEC and its chairman, participants were told that INEC was on a "war front," did not want technical advice and wanted to know if the donors were for them or against them, according to a written account provided by one of the participants.

¶6. (S) Comment: Concerns expressed by the UN technical advisers on elections regarding the failing voter registration process track closely with previous reports from USG-funded election and democracy groups. The UNDP and its international donor group which includes UNDP, DFID, CIDA and the EU has, however, been publicly silent about its technical and political concerns. But the increasingly obvious failure of the registration process and the likely political ramifications have prompted the front-line UN technical advisors to begin to discretely voice their fears that

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without significant changes the registration process, and potentially, the entire electoral process will end up failing. Iwu is hinting broadly to some European diplomats that he is prepared to abandon his hitherto high tech approach to voter registration, and to start the creation of a new voter list by hand. If he reaches this decision, however, our election experts are doubtful that the constitutionally imposed date for concluding the registration process can be met.

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